

Arson In A Small Community

Two 15 year old boys set fire to a primary school, burning the building to the ground.

During the early hours a primary school at the heart of a village was burnt to the ground. The loss to such a small community was devastating. The building, equipment and records stretching back for almost a century had gone. Shock soon turned to anger when news broke that 2 youths had been arrested and charged with arson. The 2 youths, Greg and Damien, both aged 15 years, later appeared before the Crown Court, pleaded guilty to causing £2.5 million of damage to the school and were sentenced to a 2 year Supervision Order. Both sincerely regretted their foolish and reckless behaviour and, to their credit, expressed the need to do what they could to make amends to those affected by the fire. During their supervision the case was referred to a victim/young offender mediation service that operates within the Youth Offending Team.

Mediation

The mediators, who work in pairs, arranged to meet with the Head Teacher of the school. During the meeting the implications of the boys' behaviour soon became apparent along with the harm and damage that had been caused to the school and community. The Head Teacher expressed the need, should a meeting take place with the 2 young offenders, that other representatives be involved as the staff, children, parents and the community were all 'victims' and had all been affected, in different ways, by the fire. The mediators later visited Greg and Damien at their respective homes in the presence of their parents. They were both prepared to meet their 'victims' and do what they could to make amends. A further meeting was arranged with the Head Teacher and also present was a member of staff, a parent whose child attended the school and representatives of the village and school's governing body. They all wanted to meet with the youths and their parents to explain how the fire had affected their lives. 3 months after the first meeting with the Head Teacher, the mediation between Greg, Damien and their victims took place. The meeting lasted nearly 3 hours. There was a short break and refreshments were available. The discussion was, at times, so intense that it was felt any adjournment would have lost the moment. A very frank, healthy and emotional exchange of information followed that resulted in the boys:

- Explaining what had happened
- Apologising for what they had done
- Answering questions about the incident
- Agreeing to write personal letters of apology to the Head Teacher
- Agreeing to do some reparation work for the benefit of the school and

community

- Agreeing to write a joint letter for distribution to parents of children at the school, staff at the school and school Governors
 - Agreeing to the joint letter being publicised in the local newspaper
- The meeting was, at times, very sensitive and although confidentiality was, and will continue to be, respected, there was a need for information to be released publicly to inform the school and the community what actually happened. Greg and Damien agreed to write a joint letter for public distribution.

Letter of Apology

The letter they later wrote is as follows:

To the teachers, staff and children at the school, members of the local community and any other people affected by the fire at the school. We set the wheelie bin on fire in the grounds of the school then left it to go back to where we were camping out. We left the bin because we thought it would burn out itself. We did not intentionally intend to set the school on fire but accept that our actions caused the fire at the school. We now know how upsetting and how much work it has caused everyone at the school and in the village. After the fire we were arrested by the Police and later charged. We then appeared at the Magistrates Court and were given a curfew from 9 pm to 7 am during which time we had to be with our parents. Then we went to Crown Court for trial. We both pleaded guilty and were sentenced to a 2 year supervision order. It all took a year and it was very scary for us and our parents were very upset. We both feel better that the court hearings are over with and are trying hard to put right the damage and harm that has been done. We later had a meeting with the Head Teacher and other people from the school and community to discuss what happened and to apologise personally. We are both really sorry about it all and what we have done and will never do anything like this again.

All aspects of the agreement were completed in full. The above letter was published in the local newspaper. Under the supervision of a joiner, Greg and Damien made a wooden bench that was later presented to the Head Teacher for use in the school grounds.

The Outcome

Although a traumatic and emotional experience for all involved there was a strong sense of relief and closure voiced at the end of the meeting. Feedback questionnaires returned from participants were very positive about the service they had received. 9 months following the mediation Greg and Damien were asked to reflect on the meeting and Damien said “I thought it was useful as I learnt what had happened to everyone and not just myself”. Greg said “I feel I have owned up to my responsibility and tried to make things better. The meeting took the weight off my shoulders”. Neither of the boys has re-offended. The editor of a regional newspaper that featured the story wrote:

'It is tempting to say to the two boys who have publicly apologised for burning down [the village school] 18 months ago that it's a bit late now. But they do deserve credit for having the gumption to say sorry in a regional newspaper that circulates in the village. The two secondary school pupils who set fire to a wheelie bin with disastrous consequences also say they are trying hard to put right the harm and damage caused. The signs are that some good is emerging from this episode – and that is due in no small measure to the enlightened way in which these young offenders have been dealt with by their own community, not least by the school Head Teacher herself.'